

STATINTL

Diplomacy and Fulbright's Bomb

By Marguerite Higgins

WASHINGTON.

SENATOR FULBRIGHT, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, gave a spectacular example last week of the reasons why virtually every professional diplomat in town cheered when his name was dropped from the roster of those likely to be named the New Frontier's first Secretary of State.

At precisely the most delicate moment, the Senator dropped a diplomatic bombshell in the most public way possible—a television program. The crux of the damage was contained in this exchange:

Question: "In any negotiations over Berlin, Senator, would you be willing to accept any concessions on the part of the West which closed West Berlin as an escape hatch for refugees in any way?"

Senator Fulbright: "Well, I think that might certainly be a negotiable point. The truth of the matter is I think that the Russians have the power to close it [the escape hatch] in any case. So why is this a great concession?"

But as an appalled White House aide put it, it is not only a great concession but an "impossible concession" and one that has already been specifically ruled out by President Kennedy in his Berlin speech.

Even the Russians have long hesitated at giving the world the spectacle of turning back at gun point—for no other device would suffice—the men, women and children risking all to get from Communist East Berlin to freedom. Can anyone seriously imagine the West co-operating in this grisly spectacle of physically turning back those desperately seeking asylum?

And why should the West be entrapped into doing communism's dirty work? For there is every evidence that the Russians do not, in practice, have the power completely to seal off the Berlin escape hatch for the reason that to do so would bring more problems than it solves. Already even the few (so far) additional restrictions have panicked the East Germans into fleeing West at the rate of one every four seconds. Up till now the escape hatch has also served as a safety valve. It was the reason many East Germans stayed at their job, secure in the knowledge that if they wanted ultimately to leave they could. But any attempt to seal off the safety valve completely would bring an explosion throughout East Germany that, the experts agree, would make the revolt of 1953 look puny.

And finally how could the Kennedy administration, which is planning to make a case throughout the world on the principle of self-determination, be a party to denying this principle to the refugees who each day are "voting with their feet" for freedom?

Senator Fulbright's inexplicable statement offers a double embarrassment to the Administration. For President Kennedy is deeply grateful to the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for his great contributions in pushing the foreign aid bill through the Senate. The White House does not wish to embarrass the Senator by public repudiation. But at the same time, it must somehow reassure the violently disturbed people of Germany and Berlin that under the American system the responsible Democratic officials often do not speak for the Democratic Administration.

The tragedy of this and other statements made on Germany last week by the Senator is that they came right after President Kennedy had, through a painstaking series of balances, struck a note in his Berlin speech that reassured Europe, but at the same time made plain to the Russians that this country was not bluffing.

This balance has been badly damaged. As could be expected, Mr. Fulbright's statement was received enthusiastically beyond the Iron Curtain, particularly by the East German radio. In the West it brought an astonished demand for an explanation from West German Chancellor Adenauer. And the West German headlines were a mixture of anxiety and outrage.

"A moral low blow," said Hamburg's "Die Welt."

"Der Kurier," a Berlin paper, said "Senator Fulbright . . . has a bad memory. We should like to remind him that his country also signed the Declaration of Human Rights of the U. N. Assembly. We presume that the Senator will read this declaration again before he pleads once more for the treatment of men as slaves of a regime."

Another Berlin paper, "Der Tag," declared: "We may congratulate ourselves that Senator Fulbright did not become Secretary of State . . . we cannot understand how a man whom we regard as a friend deliberately wants to throw us into the teeth of our adversaries."

Said a European diplomat: "Isn't there some way to avoid—in such crucial times—a public clash on foreign policy between Democratic party spokesmen and the President of the United States? Couldn't the American system provide for a sense of responsibility on the part of all Democratic leaders to a Democratic President?"

It is also a question being asked all over Washington except, it seems, on Capitol Hill.